

# Parade

The Miami Herald

## THE WOMAN BEHIND FIDEL CASTRO

by ANDREW ST. GEORGE



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# THE WOMAN BEHIND FIDEL CASTRO

**W**ho is Celia Sanchez?

It is a reasonable if regrettable guess that, as this is written, not one American in a thousand knows. In fact, neither did President John F. Kennedy when the name, typed on blue CIA stationery under a red-striped TOP SECRET cover, was first shown him during a tense National Security Council meeting. The President frowned:

"But who is Celia Sanchez?"

"Celia seems to be . . . the most influential person in Havana, Mr. President," explained Ambassador A. A. Berle, dean of Latin-American experts. "We think she might be of help."

It was one late afternoon three years ago this month, and if the vast U.S. government had ever been in need of help, this was the moment.

It was almost exactly one year after the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion had been debarked—and destroyed. Now the President and his advisors were meeting in emergency session to face the most recent consequence of that failure.

That morning, in Havana, after a 3-day circus trial, all 1,099 captured invaders had been convicted as "war criminals" and "traitors." Only the sentencing remained. After that, the next footfall in the Havana prison yard was likely to be that of the firing squad.

"I can't see how this girl, what's-her-name," the President looked up, "this Celia Sanchez—how she could help."

A senior CIA area analyst spoke carefully: "Mr. President, in our experience Fidel Castro will not listen to anyone but Celia. He *trusts* her. Lives in her apartment. It's the only address he's got. In this emergency, it was thought advisable to make a personal appeal to this girl through a go-between in Havana. We should know the results by the end of the week."

It took nowhere near that long. Before midnight, the go-between, Mrs. Bertha Barreto, called breathlessly from Havana to report that she had spoken with Celia, who had sounded "kind and understanding"—and willing to help.

## THE ANONYMOUS CELIA

The rest is history. Within weeks, the ransom negotiations began. In less than a year, the invaders were free and back with their families in Miami.

Characteristically, of all hands in the sensational rescue, only Celia Sanchez Manduley, a shy, slender, dark-haired woman, managed to remain anonymous. She has learned how to avoid publicity in recent years. It's a remarkable feat, considering that during these years she has become the key feminine figure of a noisy front-page story: the Cuban revolution.

"Celia has been, and continues to be, the most important person in Fidel Castro's life," a well-informed Washington reporter, Haynes Johnson, author of *The Bay of Pigs*, revealed recently. And the reigning monarchs of French literature, Jean-Paul



Cuba's woman in the background, Celia Sanchez (at door), coolly eyes aide's embrace of Castro.

## by ANDREW ST. GEORGE

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, echoed the claim after a visit to Cuba: "To reach Fidel, it is only necessary to find Celia . . . this slim, sensitive woman is the key to Castro." "Celia Sanchez is the most intriguing figure in Havana," recalls Bob Taber, the adventurer-newsman who once worked for Castro. "She's the only person for whom Castro shows an unashamed need."

Critics, on the other hand, tend to call her "*La Sardina*,"—"The Sardine"—claiming she is hard, narrow, colorless and as devoid of feminine curves as a fish. Still, it seems certain that Celia did not rise to the top of the swirling Cuban revolution without a good many buoyant talents.

Fidel Castro's utter dependence on Celia dates back to the mountain days of 1957-58, when she served as courier, camp clerk, cook, counselor and combat auxiliary. Doctors who were called in to check Castro told their diagnosis to Celia and gave her the prescriptions, for she was the only one who could make the absent-minded Fidel take his pills on anything like an orderly schedule. In addition, she alone had the patience to tend to the guerrilla headquarters correspondence, finances and records.

### HER LOYAL TROOPS

After the rebel victory, it was found that the slips and scraps of paper Celia had preserved in plastic pouches represented all there was left of the revolution archives. Naturally, control of these archives gave Celia inestimable revolutionary status over equally enthusiastic but less well-documented rebel girls.

Furthermore, she is perhaps the most casual treasurer alive, and these calm country ways with currency have earned Celia the worshipful loyalty of all headquarters troops, to whom she is the patroness of pocket money and extra mess funds. The tough elite bodyguards of Castro take orders from Celia, but no one else—"not even from me," the Maximum Leader has been heard to complain.

Ever since the Sierra Maestra, Celia has kept moving up, her iron control over Castro's headquarters and household increasing and never successfully challenged. And rumor has it that this year she may leap to the very top.

After the Bay of Pigs exchange she was raised to cabinet rank. The new honor did not alter her jealously guarded job or her way of life. "She's a sturdy, simple small-town girl with a bright brain, but she'll never change, because that bright brain of hers is impaled on an iron backbone," the late Ernest Hemingway said of her admiringly. Few people realized that Celia's new eminence might have a different significance. As a Minister of State, she is only two rungs below the top of the ladder—the Presidency.

In revolutionary Cuba, of course, the hand-picked President has just exactly one responsibility: to do exactly as Castro wishes. The present incumbent, Osvaldo Dorticos, an opportunist with a permanent smile which seems etched into suet, proved so nimble

at follow the leader that Castro kept him on beyond the constitutional limit. Recently, however, there have been growing reports that next July 26th—the sixth anniversary of his inauguration—Dorticos will step down. He will be replaced, according to rumors, by the first woman President in Cuban history: Celia.

If this happens Celia would become President just a few weeks after her 43rd birthday. Her official biography will note that she was born near Media Luna, at the rich, restless southeastern end of Cuba, the fourth among six children of a hard-working country doctor.

Unlike that hard-bitten, violent old cane-planter, Don Angel Castro, who was raising a brace of rambunctious boys named Fidel and Raul less than a hundred miles away, Celia's father, Dr. Manuel Sanchez, was a gentle, studious, affectionate man.

His wife died while Celia was still a toddler. Celia grew up a tomboy—a builder of treehouses, a tireless climber of mountains who seemed happiest on horseback or in a fishing launch.

At 12 she was sent away to the *instituto*, the finishing school in near-by Manzanillo. After graduation, she returned, a soft-spoken, earnest young lady.

At 19, she accepted a ring from Salvador Sadurni, the tall, wavy-haired son of Manzanillo's richest hardware merchant. Their wedding date was on the church calendar when Salvador came down with pneumonia and died swiftly and shockingly.

The grief-stricken girl clung to her father—and discovered politics. She threw herself into the nationalist movement fermenting around the firebrand reform leader Eduardo Chibas. But the fanatic Chibas killed himself—and Celia was once more adrift.

She developed a mysterious allergy which impeded her breathing. Her worried family sent her to New York for a change of scenery and recuperation. During six months on the Upper West Side, near Columbia University, Celia recovered her spirits, learned passable English and acquired a lasting fondness for New York City. Curiously enough, only her immediate family knows that Celia understands English.

When Celia returned to Cuba, she found that the dead Chibas had left a smoldering political heritage.



On the march, Celia follows Castro in Sierra Maestra. She served throughout guerrilla days.

No one claimed it more loudly than a young rebel whose family came from Celia's own county. His name was Fidel Castro, and Celia promptly resolved to serve his cause.

At the time Castro, a squeaky-voiced student leader with a pencil-thin mustache, was in jail. But then he was amnestied and went off to Mexico to recruit for an invasion against the Batista government. After a series of false starts, the peanutshell invasion was finally launched. It lasted 48 hours, leaving Fidel a tattered, starving fugitive.

Somewhere in the jungle a reception committee of friends was waiting to make contact with him. But Castro—characteristically—showed up late and at the wrong place. The committee gave up, none more heartbroken than the only woman among them: Celia.

"Back in Manzanillo, newsboys were screaming the Havana extras about Fidel's defeat," Celia recalled years later. "There were two kinds of headlines, CASTRO DEAD and CASTRO SURRENDERS, because the army and the police had put out two different stories. I still remember how those shouts stung me as I walked across town. I was too unhappy to think or even cry. Then a new headline appeared, CASTRO STILL IN MEXICO. The paper said Fidel was too smart to risk his neck in the first landing and had wisely stayed behind in Mexico. I knew that other politicians had done the same thing, ducking to let the gunmen take the punishment, and how despicable it was. Then I found that I was crying and couldn't stop."

### GIRL MEETS REVOLUTIONARY

But a week later the news went out all over Cuba: Castro was alive and in the Sierra! Celia ran to volunteer for courier duty. To everyone's amazement, including her own, Celia turned out to be the guerrillas' best courier. In the dark undersea of night jungles, crossing and recrossing bayonet-bristling foothills, she truly became a silent, sinewy, invisible little *sardina*. She slipped through, even when the furious army troops hunted her in battalion strength.

"All that agonizing first year we spent in the mountains," the guerrilla leader Che Guevara recalled years later, "I was shaken only twice. First, when I was shot through the neck. The second, when we heard a false rumor that Celia had been caught. The arrangements for our supplies, our money, our contacts with the underground in the cities—it all depended on Celia getting through. She always did."

The tireless girl who always stayed cool caught Castro's eye, too. The young leader and the doctor's daughter became inseparable companions. Ever since, the real nature of their companionship has been the subject of endless speculation. Actually, only their closest friends—which, before I broke with Castro, included this reporter—knew that the relationship between Celia and Fidel was, at the deepest level, an intense love affair.

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# Communism—and so does Celia

office," says Dr. Raul Chibas, then chief finance officer of the Cuban Army. "She asked me for \$75,000 for Delio and his bunch. I called Celia, and sure enough, she said it was all right. So I gave little Acacia 750 \$100 bills, and I watched in stupefaction while she stuffed them into a plastic pouch, the kind Celia had used in the Sierra, and she tripped off."

Delio and his men landed secretly in the Dominican Republic in June 1959 and headed for the hills. Acacia was supposed to follow them with the first supply drop. There was, however, no supply drop, because the Dominican Army cut down the invaders like an overripe cane patch.

Almost 300 prisoners were slaughtered. Poor Delio was left alive to be broken in body and spirit; from a solitary cell, he taped propaganda

broadcasts and appeared at mock trials, his voice barely audible.

But in 1961 there was sudden change in Santo Domingo. Dictator Trujillo was assassinated, and it was decided to let Delio go home. The pale, emaciated ex-commander hobbled aboard a Havana-bound plane.

It didn't seem likely the world would hear of him again. He had lost his men, his will to resist, perhaps even his honor as a Cuban officer.

But when Delio landed at Havana airport, he blinked his tear-blind eyes in vain to find the army cops who would take him away. Standing in front of the customs gate, a squadron of headquarters guards cradling their Tommy-guns in a lazy semicircle behind her, Celia was waiting. She had come to take Delio home, and no one was going to interfere.

No one did; that was understandable. The puzzle was that Celia had gone so far to save poor Delio's neck.

"Can't you guess?" her sister Graciela asked. "It's simple, you know. Celia helped Delio recover his health, saw to it that he got a modest job with the government, and then saw to it that he and little Acacia were married, because of course little Acacia had fallen for Delio exactly as Celia had once fallen for Fidel."

"And of course, Delio is anything but another Fidel. He'll never be an officer again, and they are living very quietly in Camaguey. But they're happy. They have a little boy, and a second baby on the way. And let me tell you: If you could ask my proud sister Celia if she wanted to relive her life again in a different way, she might tell you: 'Yes, Acacia's way.'"



Women around Castro are shown in 1961 photo. Since then, all but Celia (at Castro's left) and Conchita Fer-

nandez (extreme left) have been banished. Tete Casuso (2nd from left) was sent to UN at Celia's suggestion.



Celia's future: President Osvaldo Dorticos (r.) may step down in July, make her Cuba's first woman President.



Celia's place—two-balcony building behind her and Castro—serves as Cuban revolutionary headquarters.

Growing up is really like turning a corner—a very important corner.



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